DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 154 HE 028 697

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TITLE Cultural, Economic and Social Influences on Coeducation in the United States and Implications for Student Services.
PUB DATE [94]
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Coeducation; *Cultural Influences; *Economic Factors; Educational History; Females; Higher Education; School Policy; Social Bias; *Social Influences; *Student Personnel Services; United States History; *Womens Education

ABSTRACT

A study of American history revealed trends linking women's entry into higher education with economic and social factors that have shaped American life. Coeducation began at Oberlin College (Ohio) in 1837 when women were admitted as degree candidates to the same academic courses as men. Industrialization, westward expansion, the growth of public schools, congressional legislation, wars, the Great Depression, and the women's movement are all phenomena which significantly impacted the development of coeducation. Initially, teaching became a major route for women's admittance into higher education. The Romantic movement and its ideals of democracy and egalitarianism ultimately increased interest in education for women. The Civil War also was an impetus in several ways for increased higher education for females. In addition, periods of economic decline often saw enrollment declines and prompted colleges and universities to admit women. As a result of colleges and universities shifting to coeducational policies, the student services profession was called upon to respond to the needs of the changing student population. Deans of Women, separate dormitory and gymnasium facilities, women's organization, and attention to male and female social interaction on campus were examples of how student services had adapted to the changes brought about by coeducation. Contains nine references. (JB)

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Cultural, Economic and Social Influences on Coeducation in the United States and Implications for Student Services

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Running Head: CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES

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Abstract

Coeducation at institutions of higher learning in the United States began at Oberlin College in 1837 when women were admitted as degree candidates to the same academic courses as men. Oberlin's pioneering spirit proved to be an inspirational beginning of the long, complex process of educating men and women together that is still evolving in higher education. This process of coeducation has been inextricably tied to the societal and cultural attitudes, historical events, and economic factors that have prevailed throughout American history. Industrialization, westward expansion, the growth of public schools, congressional legislation, wars, the Great Depression, and the women's movement are all phenomena which significantly impacted the development of coeducation in the United States. As a result of colleges and universities shifting to coeducational policies, the student services profession was called upon to respond to the needs of the changing student population. Deans of Women, separate dormitory and gymnasium facilities, women's organizations, and attention to male and female social interaction on campus are examples of how student services has adapted to the changes brought about by coeducation.

Cultural, Economic and Social Influences on Coeducation in the United States and Implications for Student Services

A study of American history reveals trends linking women's entry into higher education with economic and social factors that have shaped American life. Coeducation's beginnings at Oberlin College in 1837 resulted from the founders' desire to make available an education with theological emphasis to those who could not afford the elite Eastern seminaries and schools. In addition to religious reasons, the impact of industrialization, a significant decline in fertility rates, and the development of formal schooling for youth are all factors which contributed to changing women's societal roles (Solomon, 1985). Having thus been liberated from many traditional household duties, women turned their sights to becoming educated, previously a societal privilege reserved only for men.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the family was the unit of economic production in the colonies. The role of women entailed all aspects of domestic labor: food preparation, clothing, household necessities, and child rearing. The growth of trade during the later eighteenth century expanded women's employment within family-owned businesses, such as furniture making, dry goods shops, and taverns. All of these activities were tied to what was then

viewed as women's role in society--to marry, raise children, and maintain the household. However, the advent of the early nineteenth century brought with it exploration and expansion westward, a phenomena which removed eligible young men in large numbers from the established settlements in the east. This movement significantly reduced young women's chances of marrying and subsequently changed their role in life by requiring self-sufficiency. Encouraged by parents who foresaw the advantages of having educated daughters who could support themselves and thus alleviate financial pressures on the family, many women entered the teaching profession.

Teaching became a major route for women's admittance into higher education for several reasons. First, during the 1800s industrialization in the northeast brought tremendous changes to domestic tasks within the household; these changes offered more freedom to daughters than experienced by their mothers. Girls now, as well as boys, had time to attend elementary school, thus fostering the growth of the public school system. In turn, this rapid growth created a demand for more teachers. Since female teachers could be hired for much lower wages than their male counterparts, school districts began to employ women in growing numbers. For example, in 1835 female teachers were employed in Pennsylvania for nine dollars a month. Male teachers commonly earned two to four times more than women (Newcomer, 1959). This unequal reality nonetheless became a compelling

reason for implementing coeducation, as women needed adequate training as teachers to fill this need.

The Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be identified as the source of the idea of individualism which is clearly an American trait. The American version of belief in democracy and egalitarianism also developed during this timeframe. A new way of finding a place in society began to evolve. More value was based on personal merit than on one's rank in this society. Thus, the idea of personal responsibility for self-development took root in American society. Later, these ideas of egalitarianism, individualism, and democracy would increase women's interest in advancing their own education.

Another social force that increased the number of women involved in higher education was the Western expansion of our country. The term "Manifest Destiny" had first been used in 1844 by a newspaper editor; it was a concept embraced by a society eager to people the new frontier. As society changed, educational needs adjusted and both curricula and numbers of schools expanded. Diverse curricula and more schools meant more opportunities for higher education for both women and men.

The demand for increased numbers of teachers continued throughout the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, there

was a great need to educate thousands of men and women recently freed from slavery. In addition, this time period saw an increase in immigration to this country, thus adding an entirely new population to the schoolrooms in America. Finally, as the expansion westward continued and settlements began to develop, teachers were needed in these new territories to educate children living on the frontier.

Perhaps the most important gains in coeducation came in the wake of the Civil War, a time period which saw the first significant decline in male enrollment in colleges and universities in American history. Unprecedented numbers of young women were faced with the reality of having to support themselves, while formerly all-male institutions were faced with plummeting enrollment and reluctantly admitted women to ensure the institutions' survival (Rosenberg, 1988).

Concomitant with the increased demand for teachers, men were increasingly leaving the teaching field for better paying jobs. As a result, teaching became a woman's profession as more educated women were available to take the jobs abandoned by men and created by increased numbers of students. Hence, practical considerations such as women's need to support themselves, the growth of the public school system, and a decline in numbers of male teachers justified the higher education of women throughout the nineteenth century (Solomon, 1985).

The 1862 passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act greatly assisted the growth of the public sector in higher education. By enacting such legislation, Congress encouraged the growth of state universities. Taxpayers supporting these institutions demanded that their daughters, as well as their sons, be admitted (Rosenberg, 1988). Faced with such financial and political pressure, presidents of universities opposed to coeducation had no choice but to relent and admit female students in increasing numbers. The Universities of Kansas, Indiana and Minnesota were established as coeducational institutions in 1869. Universities in Missouri, Michigan and California followed suit the next year. By 1872 there were 97 coeducational colleges in the United States: 77 in the mid and far West, 17 in the South, and five in New England.

The reality that the separate education of women was too costly for many institutions to maintain became another economic factor contributing to the growth of coeducation. For instance, the University of Wisconsin admitted women to its normal department in 1863 and allowed them access to regular college courses. When female enrollment quickly reached numbers unacceptable to the male administrators who were not necessarily in favor of coeducation, the university established a separate women's college, which provided only limited course offerings compared to those available to men. However, the financial burden of maintaining the separate coordinate college was too great, and in 1871 the

women's college was closed and complete coeducation was adopted (Newcomer, 1959). Similarly, the University of Michigan opted to establish a coeducational policy in 1870 rather than to undertake the additional expense of building a school for women. Hence, coeducation was adopted often as a matter of expediency in response to financial pressures during times of economic difficulty in American history.

As Rosenberg (1988) found, "In the 1870s and 1880s women represented a small minority of the students at coeducational institutions. But by 1900 the popularity of higher education among women had become so great that female enrollment at many colleges and universities outstripped male enrollment" (p.115).

One of the single greatest societal changes of the twentieth century was the shift from a primarily agrarian to a manufacturing and urban society. Such a monumental shift led to changes that had an effect on women in higher education. With the progression of the Industrial Revolution, the work place moved to the factory, store or office. The middle-class could provide adequately for their families, while working-class wages for men were insufficient to support a family, so women and children went to work. In general,society was undergoing momentous changes which affected gender roles after 1900. By 1910 many fields in addition to teaching were open to women.

The 1920s can be viewed as one of the high points in the women's higher education movement. Nearly half of all college students were female, and women comprised 40% of the master's and 15% of the doctoral students. By 1929 women made up 32.5% of all college presidents, professors, and instructors combined. Other professions in addition to teaching opened to women during this decade and women comprised 45% of the professional work force (Graham, 1978).

Even though their admission to these arenas increased dramatically during the 1920s, Graham (1978) states, "There was no glorious past when women professionals were treated equally with men" (p.765). For example, when Alice Hamilton became a member of the Harvard Medical School faculty in 1919 (at age 50 and with an internationally renowned reputation) she was hired on the condition that she not march in the commencement procession (Graham, 1978).

During the Depression years, society, movies, books, and plays all seemed to reaffirm the traditional domestic role for women, due primarily to the lack of employment opportunities for men. Pearl Buck, speaking at the end of the 1930s, said that "women's interest in work and a profession had never been lower in the last half century" (Daniel,1987, p.88).

The majority of men's colleges admitted women during the depression years or during World War II, both periods of time experiencing sharp declines in male

enrollment (Newcomer, 1959). As institutions made the transition to coeducation, women's presence was not always welcomed or accepted. However, during these financially trying times women represented an economic asset that the institutions could no longer turn away.

As the American economy shifted gears and became a war time economy, the unemployment of the Depression years disappeared. Due to the demand for soldiers during World War II, women's employment opportunities increased. Some women interrupted their education to help the war effort by joining the labor force. The percentage of women obtaining higher education degrees began to decline after 1930 and continued to do so, not only during the war years but during the 1950s and until 1960, when it reached its lowest point since 1920 (Deighton, 1971). It seems a college education was at variance with what society wanted for women from the 1930s through the 1950s. Societal and family messages were that professional preparation was not necessary for women. Patricia Graham (1978) claims that society's ideals for women were youth, appearance, acquiescence and domesticity during the first half of this century. These ideals were not directly in conflict with a college education, but rather higher education seemed irrelevant to these ideals.

During the 1950s there was an increasing trend from single-sex colleges toward coeducational institutions for two primary reasons. First, students

increasingly insisted on attending an institution close to home, and second, students preferred coeducation, demonstrating the monumental change in sex roles and attitudes that were prevalent 50 years earlier.

The social and political events of the 1960s gave rise to a new social history which created the demand for equality of education for women in addition to access. The last half of this century has seen the rapid movement toward coeducation by the nation's most prestigious educational institutions. All of the Ivy League colleges have become coeducational, beginning with Yale in 1969 and concluding with Columbia in 1983. As the last Ivy League school to admit women, Columbia cited economics and demography as the major reasons for this change. The escalating costs and reduced federal funds for financial aid, coupled with the shrinking numbers of high school graduates, these institutions admitted women in order to maintain their most competitive standards (Rossi, 1987).

In response to the development of coeducation, the student services profession has evolved in order to meet the needs of women students. The first coeducational colleges of the century employed matrons to safeguard the female students by being "watchdogs". After 1900, due to increased female enrollment together with the more diverse character of the female student body, schools began hiring deans to supervise women students. In fact, the Deans of Women were the first student service personnel to meet annually, beginning in 1903, and

they formally organized as a professional organization in 1916. In the 1980s women's centers began to appear on campuses, which offer programs and services geared specifically to women. These women's centers for the most part replaced the Deans of Women by taking up the responsibility of advocacy for women's needs on campus (Brooks, 1988). Hence, student service personnel were needed first to monitor the separation of the sexes at colleges and universities and later to ease the transition in an atmosphere in which relaxed social mores called for more integration of the sexes in campus activities.

In the early years on coeducational campuses, separate facilities such as dormitories and gymnasiums were the norm. Also, organizations and activities for women were generally similar, albeit separate, from those of men. Each of the these aspects of campus life required additional staffing, once again impacting the evolution of the student services profession.

Over time the presence of women on campus brought about an end to the seminary-like regulations of the all-male colleges. Student life also changed as women gradually developed alternative professional goals. "Women's entrance into higher education brought about a new awareness of social issues and a push toward the view that higher education should be linked with larger social issues, women on campus served to create 'attitudes, values, and practices; a microcosm

of the world students expected to enter after graduation'" (Gordon, 1990, p. 11,4).

This interest in social reform and social awareness has been and continues to be reflected in student services programs and activities on campus. Women student services professionals, women faculty, and women administrators all act as role models to women students. In addition, organizations such as volunteer services, community tutoring projects, and religiously affiliated programs serve to expose students to the larger world outside the campus gates. Traditionally, programs of this sort have been dominated by women, once again harkening back to societal roles and gender issues that continue into the 1990s.

As mentioned earlier, women's centers on campuses exist to help women students with unique social, psychological, and academic needs. Student services have become aware of the growing number of students who are mothers, considering programs and policies enabling them to combine and cope with the demands of classwork, home, and work. Women's centers can help advocate for child care, financial aid, housing, and support systems for these mothers.

Women's health issues are dealt with separately at campus health and counseling centers. There are organizations on campuses which can provide career counseling and support and scholarship funds. Women's studies programs

are common on campuses, and library collections and student services programs reflect these trends. Along with these services, library collections are more a reflection of women and men's contributions to society and knowledge, as more research is being done by and about women in today's world.

Since its early days at Oberlin College, coeducation has evolved and progressed to the point where more than 95% of all college women are enrolled at coeducational institutions (Rosenberg, 1988). Coeducation has brought about the emergence of the unique aspirations and experiences of women students, and thus changed the male-centered focus of traditional knowledge and teaching. "The study of women has come out of this and transformed how we think about knowledge itself and the society that nurtures it" (Rosenberg, 1988, p.129).

The shifts in coeducation's history reflect the history of the United States, as the decision to admit women to the predominantly male domain of higher education has been impacted tremendously by social, cultural and economic factors at any given period in American history. The role of student services in the development of coeducation has been to evaluate the needs of the current student population and to implement programs designed to meet those needs, thereby providing total quality education for all students in attendance.

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